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PRESERVING THREE HUNDRED FIFTY
YEARS OF CHANGE IN THE BLACKSTONE
BLOCK.

Miguel Gomez-Ibanez



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1977

Preserving Three Hundred Fifty Years of Change in the Blackstone Block

MIGUEL GÓMEZ-IBÁÑEZ*

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With renewed commercial interest in Boston's waterfront and the recent successful restoration of the Faneuil Hall Markets, one of Boston's oldest, yet least publicized, historic districts is beginning to attract the attention of many visitors and real estate developers. The Blackstone Block, occupying 2.3 acres directly behind Boston City Hall, contains one of the last remaining fragments of Boston's original seventeenth-century street pattern. In addition, its buildings, including two of national historic significance, represent nearly three hundred years of Boston's development, yet form an architecturally cohesive group. An understanding of the history of the block reveals it to be a unique district within the city and one which will present preservationists with difficult problems regarding its use in years to come as pressure for its commercial development increases.

The name of Blackstone is synonymous with the beginning of Boston. Rev. William Blackstone (also spelled Blaxton) was the first white settler credited with making a permanent home (in 1625) within the boundaries of modern Boston. Blackstone had arrived in the New World two years earlier as the chaplain of the Robert Gorge expedition, which established the first English settlement in the region. This small group of explorers soon abandoned its settlement to return to the comforts of England, leaving Blackstone and perhaps a few others to live alone on the newly claimed land.¹

Blackstone chose to build his home near a spring on the west slope of Beacon Hill,

and five years later persuaded Gov. John Winthrop and his Massachusetts Bay Colony to establish a permanent settlement near his spring. Blackstone must have recognized the Shawmut peninsula as an appropriate site for a city. Connected to the mainland by a very narrow neck, the land was easily defensible. The peninsula also formed a large cove capable of sheltering ships, and high promontories on either side of the cove provided natural vantage points for sentries, thus providing protection by sea.²

Today, the topography of Boston bears virtually no resemblance to that which William Blackstone knew. Over the years hills have been leveled and bays and coves filled in to form the geographic features of twentieth century Boston. The desire to regularize the topography, the devastating fires that periodically leveled the city, and the pressures of a rapidly growing mercantile population combined to wipe out all but a few traces of the early settlement. Partly by accident, partly through a shift in economic focus, the Blackstone Block escaped serious alteration.

The block can be identified in the earliest descriptions of the colonial settlement because three of its four boundaries were originally defined by natural features. The block occupied a narrow stretch of usable

*Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez is an architect with Endeavor, Inc., Cambridge, Mass. He received his masters degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1976.

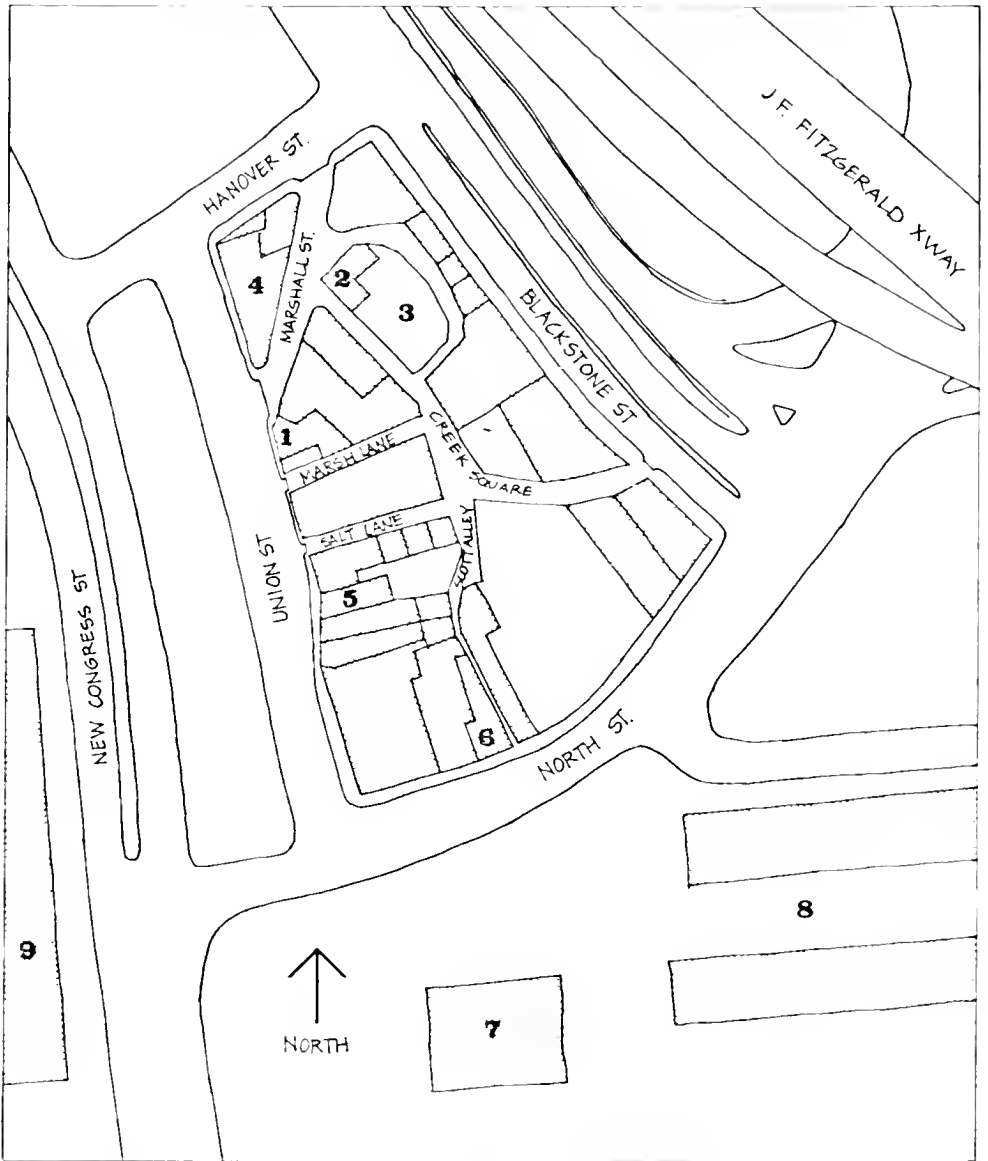


FIG. 1. MAP OF THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS. (Drawing by the author.)

KEY TO FIGURE 1

1. Union Oyster House, 41 Union Street, c. 1713
2. Ebenezer Hancock House, 10 Marshall Street, c. 1767
3. Site of Hancock Row, c. 1785, demolished in 1942
4. Union Block, 45-55 Union Street, c. 1844
5. 15-21 Union Street, c. 1822
6. 20-22 North Street, c. 1824
7. Faneuil Hall
8. Faneuil Hall Markets
9. Boston City Hall

land bounded on the east by Town Cove, and on the west by a similar inlet, known as Mill Cove. To the north was a marshy area through which a creek meandered.³

Town Cove, which provided a natural harbor, was an early center of economic activity in Boston and caused considerable development of the Blackstone Block in the seventeenth-century.⁴ Before 1643 the creek along the northern edge of the block was enlarged and made to connect Town Cove with Mill Cove. Mill Cove was then cut off from the sea by a causeway (now Causeway Street) and became Mill Pond, which, when drained by the outgoing tide, provided the community with a source of tidal water power. Although a mill was operating by the side of Mill Creek in 1643, the center of the block was still unusable marsh land.⁵ Pressure must have been felt to develop this land so close to the dock, because in 1644 the town began releasing this commonage to individuals for development.⁶

By the end of the seventeenth-century all the lanes within the Blackstone Block had been laid out. First to appear in town records is Marshall Lane, donated to the town by Thomas Marshall in 1652. Scottow's Alley (now Scott Alley) was laid out in 1677, and reference to Marsh Lane first

appears in 1678. Finally, in 1699 Salt Lane was established, thus virtually completing the street pattern as we know it today.⁷

The buildings of this earliest period are known to have been of wood and rough-cast, a style typical of medieval England.⁸ None of these buildings, however, has survived. Only in the pattern of alleys and lanes within the block can traces of the seventeenth-century still be identified. This street pattern has since been extended upward by the walls of the larger-scaled buildings that strain to conform to the winding alleys of earlier generations.

The construction of the immense Long Wharf in 1711, reflecting the continued growth of Boston as New England's primary trading center, shifted some of the economic focus away from the Blackstone Block. Though the new docking facility eclipsed the old Town Dock, the Blackstone Block still benefitted from the continued economic prosperity of the city. The 1722 Bonner map of Boston shows the extent of this development during the first quarter-century (Fig. 2). By 1800 the marsh within the block was completely filled in, and virtually all of the usable area had been built upon (see Fig. 3). The Blackstone Block maintained its identity as a vigorous commercial center; most of the buildings



FIG. 2. DETAIL OF THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK. From John Bonner, "The Town of Boston in New England" (Boston, 1722: SPNEA Archives).



FIG. 4. UNION OYSTER HOUSE. 41 Union Street, c. 1713. (Photograph by William T. Clark, SPNEA Archives.)

housed artisan workshops, small businesses or tavern on the first floor and dwellings above.⁹

Two of these eighteenth-century structures survive, namely, the Union Oyster House and the Ebenezer Hancock House, built by Ebenezer's more famous brother, John Hancock. The Union Oyster House, a three and one-half story gambrel roofed brick building, is believed to have been built between 1713 and 1717 (Fig. 4). From 1771 to 1775 it was the home of Isaiah Thomas and was where he printed his revolutionary broadside, "The Massachusetts Spy." Inflammatory articles from "The Spy" were quoted in newspapers throughout the thirteen colonies, and its delivery boys were said to double as messengers for

the revolutionaries. The building was later a dry goods store (1780) and in 1826 became the Union Oyster House of today.¹⁰

The Ebenezer Hancock house now stands on a lot once inherited by John Hancock from his uncle, Thomas Hancock, at the latter's death (Fig. 5). John Hancock constructed the present building shortly after 1767, and later gave it to his brother, Ebenezer. Ebenezer Hancock, then Paymaster of the Eastern Continental Army, used 10 Marshall Street to store two million silver crowns loaned to the revolutionary government by Louis XVI of France in 1778. Next to this house, along the east side of Creek Square, John Hancock constructed several brick houses in 1785. Known as Hancock Row, they were

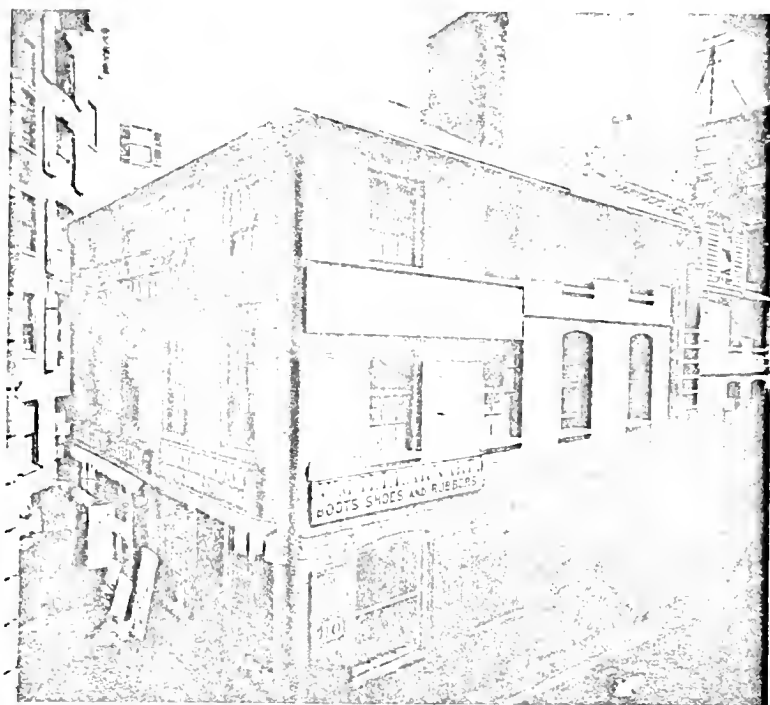


FIG. 5. EBENEZER HANCOCK HOUSE. 10 Marshall Street, c. 1767. (SPNEA Archives.)

demolished in 1942.¹¹

A curiosity to be found at 9 Marshall Street in the Blackstone Block is a mill-stone, known today as the Boston Stone (Fig. 6). It was first used by Thomas Child (1662-1706), a painter, who established his business in the Blackstone Block in 1692. In 1737 the mill-stone was set into the corner of a house on Marshall Street to protect it from damage by passing carriages. In 1835 the stone was reset into the existing building, built on the same site as the first (now identified as number 9), and was inscribed with the words "Boston Stone." It was adopted as the zero milestone of Boston and is the point from which all distances are measured.¹²

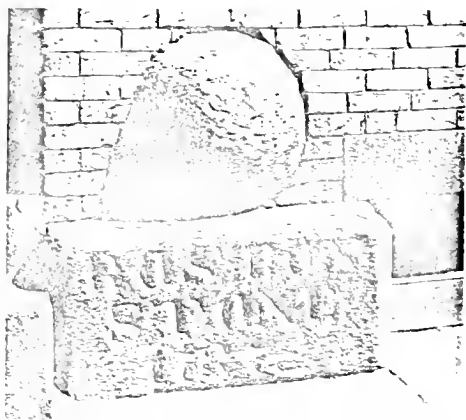


FIG. 6. THE BOSTON STONE. 9 Marshall Street. (Photograph by Arthur Haskell, SPNEA Archives.)

While the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been a time of rapid growth for Boston in terms of power and prestige, the nineteenth-century was one of rapid growth in size. Boston's population, which in the preceding century had grown from about nine thousand to just over eighteen thousand in 1790, increased at a much higher rate in the nineteenth-century. Within thirty-five years the population had tripled, reaching fifty-eight thousand. Boston's physical dimensions likewise grew. In the words of historian Walter Muir Whitehill, this was the century of "cutting down the hills to fill in the coves."¹³ It was the century of Bulfinch and Back Bay, the century that established the shape and character of Boston as it is known today.

The first of these vast earth moving projects, the lowering of Beacon Hill by sixty

feet to fill in the seventy acre Mill Pond, was begun in 1804 and had an immediate impact on the Blackstone Block. With the filling in of Mill Pond, the mill race along the edge of the Blackstone Block was no longer needed. By 1833 it had disappeared, and in its place was Blackstone Street, thus completing the boundaries of the block as they are today. In 1824, with workmen still carting fill in the direction of Mill Pond, work began on an even larger project adjoining the block. First the Town Dock, and then the entire Town Cove were filled in to add another 112 acres to the city.¹⁴

The establishment of Blackstone Street required the removal of obstructing buildings and greatly reduced the size of the building lots on that side of the block. During the reconstruction that necessarily followed, the orientation of the buildings on



FIG. 7. 15-21 UNION STREET, c. 1822 and 25 UNION STREET after alterations. (Photograph by the author.)

these lots was changed to face the new street. Thus, when the first new structure was completed on Blackstone Street in 1835, just two years after the filling of the creek began, it faced out from the center of the block, rather than inward toward Creek Square. During the next twenty years buildings were replaced along the entire length of Blackstone Street and continued to face outward. These structures were similar in style—all were unpretentious common-bond brick buildings with straight brownstone lintels and were four or five stories tall.

Other changes to the Blackstone Block came about during the nineteenth-century. One of these changes was in the character of the block. The Blackstone Block of the eighteenth-century had been an integrated residential and commercial neighborhood with three story buildings mixing these two functions. During the nineteenth-century the majority of these buildings were replaced by larger commercial concerns, primarily food markets and retail clothing stores, which undermined the block's residential quality.¹⁵

Another major effect of the nineteenth-century was a change in the architectural style. The area grew to be dominated by the many new federal-style buildings constructed during the expansion years of 1820 to 1850. This neoclassical influence saw its greatest expression in the renovation of nearby Faneuil Hall by Charles Bulfinch in 1805 and the building of the neighboring Quincy or Faneuil Hall Markets by Alexander Parris in 1825. Simple federal features—common-bond brick, a gable roof with small cornice, flared lintels, and square windows on the top floor—are all evident in the three buildings between 15 and 21 Union Street (Fig. 7). Later buildings adopted the square lintels of the Greek Revival style; 20-22 North Street is an excellent example (Fig. 8).

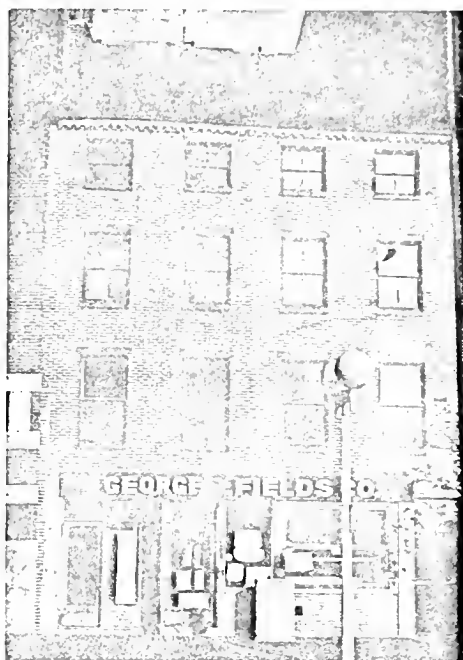


FIG. 8. 20-22 NORTH STREET, c. 1824. (Photograph by the author.)

The third change of the nineteenth-century was a trend toward the consolidation of smaller parcels of land into larger building lots to accommodate the larger-scaled buildings. This trend has continued into the twentieth-century. An early example is the Union Block building at 45-55 Union Street (Fig. 9). Some of the larger buildings constructed later in the century were not able to adapt as gracefully to their irregular sites.

The economic decline of the waterfront area in the twentieth-century greatly affected the Blackstone Block. Though the block showed a surge of vitality in 1928 with the construction of the five story Handschumacher Building at 46-52 North Street, by mid-century the vacant upper floors of many buildings indicated that the Blackstone Block was losing its appeal as

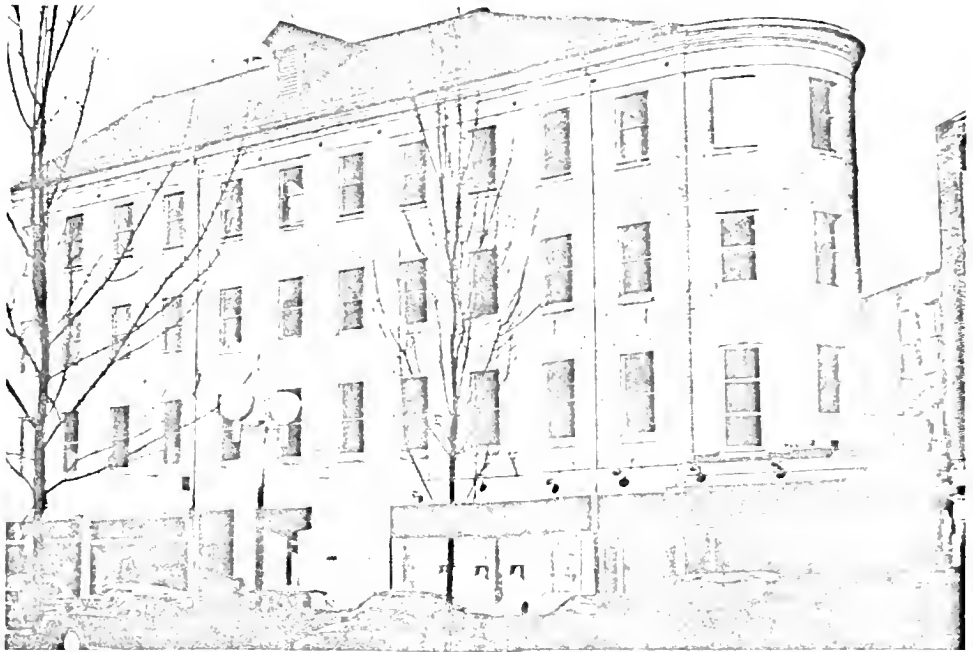


FIG. 9. UNION BLOCK. 45-55 Union Street, c. 1844. (Photograph by the author.)

an attractive commercial area. Some owners, burdened with unrentable and deteriorating properties, had the upper floors of their buildings removed, probably to reduce tax assessments. Blackstone Street, facing the elevated expressway built in the 1950s, had all but two buildings along its length reduced from four and five stories to one (Fig. 10).¹⁶ The development of Government Center in the 1960s, however, signalled a reversal of this general deterioration. Nevertheless, economic decay had left its mark. In addition to the lowering in height of many buildings, some structures were removed entirely, including the late eighteenth-century Hancock Row and a blacksmith shop dating from the nineteenth-century, both along Creek Square.

Today, the buildings that remain in the Blackstone Block no longer seem to be

threatened by neglect. For example, most of the properties on Union Street, behind City Hall, have been restored recently. Some buildings, such as the Union Block were rehabilitated with considerable attention to architectural detail. Other properties, however, like the four story Charlestown Savings Bank, which was "colonialized" down to two stories, were not restored with as much sensitivity to the building and its location (see Fig. 7).

With the restoration of the Faneuil Hall Markets, the northern edge of the block has captured the attention of real estate developers. In August, 1977, nine development proposals were submitted to the Boston Redevelopment Authority for one parcel of land along North Street.¹⁷ Submissions included plans for a theater center, a luxury hotel, and several shopping malls, all capitalizing on the attractive

pedestrian environment created by the Faneuil Hall Markets across the street. The large size of this North Street parcel makes its development a crucial factor in the future of the Blackstone Block.

Blackstone Street, currently the most physically decayed section of the block, is another area in need of attention. The existing produce markets stand in contrast to the larger-scaled buildings of North Street. The markets are remnants of a row of four and five story commercial structures built between 1835 and 1850, but virtually no hint remains of their original nineteenth-century design. But while this area may have the least architectural value within the block, the Blackstone Street produce markets provide the only real street life in the block. With fruits and vegetables piled high along the sidewalk, even the presence

of the expressway on the opposite side of the street is not noticeable to the pedestrian.

Perhaps the area with the greatest potential for restoration within the Blackstone Block lies among the most unnoticed buildings of the block—the smaller nineteenth-century structures that line the interior alleys and lanes. They exist now only as supplemental properties to the larger commercial structures facing the exterior streets. For example, the windows and doors of three nineteenth-century row houses, which once opened into Salt Lane, a narrow passage, are now bricked up. These buildings have been lowered to a height of two stories and are used as storage space for a bank on Union Street. They are reminders of the residential neighborhood that once existed in the Blackstone

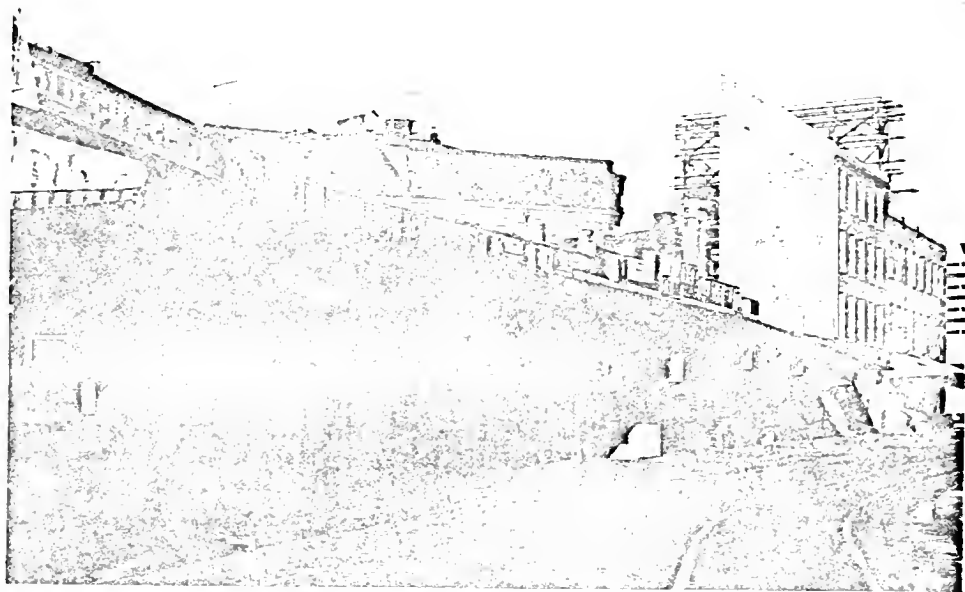


FIG. 10. BLACKSTONE STREET showing the removal of upper stories. (Photograph by the author.)

Block. Scott Alley also contains evidence that many nineteenth-century residences opened onto the interior spaces of the block. Although their openings have been bricked up, two rowhouses retain their original height of three and one half stories. The reopening of these buildings onto Scott Alley and Salt Lane would help clarify the picture of early nineteenth-century Boston which the Blackstone Block suggests.

Clearly, with mounting pressure to realize the economic potential of the Blackstone Block, and with all the opportunities for development that the block presents, those interested in the preservation of this historic district should try to influence its development as much as possible. The most important historic features of the Blackstone Block must be identified, and preservation goals must be established.

The most obvious historic feature of the block is the original seventeenth-century street pattern which remains intact and which is the largest example remaining in Boston. As with most historic districts, the Blackstone Block also contains a number of architectural landmarks whose preservation is essential. The two most distinguished buildings are the previously mentioned Ebenezer Hancock House and the Union Oyster House. In addition, outstanding buildings remain from the first half of the nineteenth-century, such as the Union Block and the federal-style buildings of Union and North Streets.

A less obvious, but more important, historic feature of the Blackstone Block is its unique character. The typical historic districts with which most people are familiar, such as Back Bay or Beacon Hill, were built over a relatively short period of time and reflect a specific period of architectural history. Modern equivalents can be found in Boston's Government Center or the West End, where large-scale clearance was

followed by a massive building program. The Blackstone Block, on the other hand, derives its character from the fact that it presents a complex picture of three hundred fifty years of economic and architectural evolution and growth. Each period has left its mark on the block, but no single period or architectural style dominates it today.

The rich and mixed survivals in the Blackstone Block present problems for their protection—both for the professional preservationist and for the public. For the public, such a complex overlay of buildings and social and economic functions is not easily understood without the benefit of historic interpretation. The buildings are likely to be viewed as unrelated, rather unattractive structures jumbled together. Most people react more sympathetically to the attractive homogeneity of Beacon Hill, but feel indifferent toward the preservation of an historic district such as the Blackstone Block.

In the absence of a publicly perceived need for preservation, the preservation planner must assume responsibility for protecting the block and ensuring its development in a manner that will enhance its educational and historic value. But for the planner, who may understand the significance of each facet of the block's image, this is not easily accomplished. The restoration of any single aspect of the block must necessarily be at the expense of some other aspect of its historical development. When dealing with an historical image that is made up of several layers, preservationists are put in the position of deciding which layer to restore. For example, the Ebenezer Hancock House now stands alone in Creek Square in the position of prominence it must have enjoyed when first built. But the isolation of this building has been made possible only by the demolition of the rowhouses along Creek Square

which were also built by John Hancock. Today, these structures would have been considered valuable and worthy of preservation had they survived.

The crucial problem in the future of the Blackstone Block is not the preservation of landmark buildings, for their value is readily appreciated. It is instead the preservation of the unique evolutionary quality of this district. In this sense, the problems

facing the Blackstone Block are indicative of the problems preservationists will be facing in the future. Ultimately, their concern cannot be for the restoration of the physical form of a city but rather the establishment of links between generations of buildings. It is this delicate relationship between generations that is the major asset of the Blackstone Block.

NOTES

¹ Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston, A Topographical History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Belknap Press, 1959), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, see maps on pages 9 and 10.

⁴ Juston Winsor, *The Memorial History of Boston*, vol. I, *The Early and Colonial Periods* (Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1880), pp. 545-46.

⁵ Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1920), map insert between pages 12 and 13.

⁶ Winsor, *op. cit.*, vol II, *The Provincial Period*, Introduction, pp. xii-xiii.

⁷ Thwing, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

⁸ Abbott Lowell Cummings, "The Old Feather Store," *Old-Time New England*, vol. XLVIII, no. 4 (Spring, 1958), pp. 85-89.

⁹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Statistics of the United States' Direct Tax of 1798*, Document 92 (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1890).

¹⁰ US Boston National Historic Sites Commission, *The Boston National Historic Sites Commission Final Report* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65. See also Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1875), pp. 144-45; and E. G. Porter, *Rambles in Old Boston* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1887), p. 38, for discussions of the Ebenezer Hancock House and Hancock Row.

¹² Abbott Lowell Cummings, "Decorative Painters and House Painting at Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1725," in *American Painting to 1776: A Reappraisal*, ed., Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville, Va.: Published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum by the University Press of Virginia, 1971), pp. 114-16.

¹³ Whitehill, *op. cit.*, title of chapter IV.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79. See also Henry Russell Hitchcock, *Boston Architecture, 1637-1954* (New York: Reinhold Pub. Corp., 1954), for descriptions of the many earth moving projects of that time.

¹⁵ *The Combined Business Directory for New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Newark*, (New York: H. A. Curtin and Co., 1893).

¹⁶ The lowering in height of the buildings can be seen by comparing aerial photographs of the area and by comparing periodic atlases of Boston which list the heights of buildings. Photographs appear in Massachusetts Government Center Commission, *A Competition to Select an Architect for the New City Hall* (Boston: Published by the Commission, 1961); and E. C. Banfield and Martin Meyerson, *Boston, the Job Ahead* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966). Also compare *Atlas of Boston, 1938* (Philadelphia: George Washington Bromley and Co., 1938) with *Atlas of Boston, 1963* (Pelham, N.Y.: Sanborn Map Co., 1963).

¹⁷ Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez to John Dobie, Project Architect for the Blackstone Block, Boston Redevelopment Authority, telephone conversation, 11 August 1977.

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